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Wednesday, 25 April 2007, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Howells	(United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Belle
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Congo	Mr. Biabaroh-Iboro
	France	Mr. Lacroix
	Ghana	Mr. Yankey
	Indonesia	Mrs. Asmady
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	Peru	Mr. Voto-Bernales
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Bader
	Russian Federation	Mr. Dolgov
	Slovakia	Mr. Matulay
	South Africa	Mr. Sangqu
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-31853 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Israel, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Gillerman (Israel) took a seat at the Council table; the representatives of the other aforementioned countries took the seats reserved for them at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 19 April 2007 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, which will be issued as document S/2007/228 and which reads as follows:

> "I have the honour to request that, in accordance with its previous practice, the Security Council invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting of the Security Council which will be held on Wednesday, 25 April 2007, regarding the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question."

I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to participate in the meeting in accordance with the rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Mansour (Palestine) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Pascoe: Since I last briefed the Council, political and diplomatic initiatives aimed at rejuvenating peacemaking in the Middle East have continued to evolve in a mostly positive fashion.

The Secretary-General, who returns today from his second trip to the region, is actively encouraging those local, regional and international initiatives. However, the forward momentum we are witnessing on the political-diplomatic level is threatened by the deteriorating security situation on the ground, especially the continuing violence experienced by Israelis and Palestinians alike. Leaders on all sides must do their utmost to prevent this latest upsurge of violence from escalating further.

Let me first turn to the major political developments for the period, beginning with the formation of the National Unity Government. After being approved by an 83-to-3 vote in the Legislative Council, the Palestinian National Unity Government was sworn in on 17 March, in accordance with the programme agreed at Mecca. The Quartet, reiterating respect for the agreement and Palestinian democracy, has encouraged progress in the direction of its three principles, while indicating its intention to assess the Government's commitment not only by its platform and composition, but also by its actions.

President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert met in Jerusalem on 15 April. They discussed immediate humanitarian and security issues, including efforts to build confidence through action on security reform and implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access. They reportedly also exchanged views on aspects of a future Palestinian State and a time frame

for achieving it, and agreed to meet again soon. We encourage them to build on those discussions, which were agreed to during Secretary Rice's March visit to the region, and the Secretary-General has urged continued efforts in that regard.

Following the reaffirmation of the Arab peace initiative at the Arab League Summit, a follow-up Ministerial Committee meeting in Cairo on 18 April established working groups to engage international partners and Israel and created greater public awareness of the potential of the Arab peace initiative. The Secretary-General welcomed the engagement of the League of Arab States and stated that he looked forward to meeting with the Ministerial Committee that has been formed to promote that process. Prime Minister Olmert has welcomed the initiative as a "positive approach".

At the invitation of the Israeli Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, a Syrian-American businessman, Ibrahim Suleiman, visited Israel to brief the Committee on unofficial efforts to draft elements of a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. Both Governments as well as the participants have underlined that this was a private initiative.

I would also like to record that the Palestinian Central Election Commission conducted registration of 61,400 new voters between 28 March and 2 April, with technical assistance from the United Nations and under the scrutiny of some 2,800 domestic observers and party agents, who qualified the process as inclusive, fair and transparent.

Despite a number of positive political developments, we are deeply concerned at the overall situation on the ground. In the reporting period, at least 43 Palestinians have been killed — 22 in intra-Palestinian fighting and 21 by the Israel Defense Forces — while over 200 Palestinians and at least 13 Israelis have been injured. According to reports from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the bulk of fatalities and injuries from 14 March through 17 April were attributed to 83 incidents involving Palestinian factional fighting or family feuding and 69 incidents involving the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinians.

In addition, according to United Nations figures, between 14 March and 17 April, 54 rockets and mortars were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel. Prime Minister Olmert noted last week that there had been a significant drop since mid-April in the rate of rockets being fired, which appeared to be the result of the continuing efforts of President Abbas with the various factions. However, last weekend Israel carried out a number of arrests in West Bank cities, during which nine Palestinians were killed, and a rocket hit the town of Sderot, underlining the dangers that those attacks still pose. Israel has reported that over 24 rockets and mortars were fired from Gaza on the morning of 24 April. The military wing of Hamas has claimed responsibility. The Palestinian Government has called for the ceasefire to be respected, and the Israeli Government has exercised restraint.

Israeli officials continue to express concern about the alleged smuggling of weapons between Egypt and the Gaza Strip and about the reported increase in the payload and range of the rockets that are fired from Gaza into Israel. In that regard, the efforts of the Government of Egypt to maintain the ceasefire and halt rocket fire are appreciated.

The lack of substantial improvement in the security situation is a matter of great concern. The obstacles to achieving progress recently led the new Minister of the Interior to offer his resignation. It is important that the Palestinian Authority acts to counter the smuggling of weapons and rocket fire against Israel and takes steps to implement the internal security plan endorsed by the Palestinian Cabinet to restore law and order. That is not only the overwhelming desire of Palestinians but is also vital for continued international engagement in Gaza.

In that connection, we continue to be deeply concerned about the fate of kidnapped BBC journalist Alan Johnston, and we reiterate the Secretary-General's call for his safety and immediate release. We were also greatly alarmed when a vehicle carrying the Director of the operations in Gaza of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and a senior United Nations security official came under heavy attack on 18 March. Those and several other incidents — including attacks against Internet cafes, other business establishments and the American International School in Gaza — have led the United Nations to take further mitigating measures to ensure staff security. That situation is being kept under close review.

The release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit is also crucial to moving ahead. In that regard, it is

reported that various proposals for prisoner exchanges have been discussed. On 16 April, Prime Minister Olmert stated that he was open to a "reasonable exchange" in order to free Shalit.

The Government of Israel must also play its part to calm the situation, in particular with regard to the Israeli settler community. Attacks in Hebron on Palestinian children and a mentally disabled Palestinian man, which were carried out by groups of settlers, have been widely reported. Likewise, the Government of Israel must ensure that measures for Israeli security are not carried out at the expense of innocent Palestinians. All security measures must be proportionate. Continued operations into Palestinian population centres in the West Bank — almost inevitably with resultant civilian casualties — are matters of great concern.

Despite the provisions of the Road Map that call for a settlement freeze, the construction of new housing units is taking place in some 75 of the 121 settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. Settlement development continues on both sides of the barrier. There is major ongoing construction in Maale Adumim, Beitar Illit and Modiin Illit.

On 10 April, Israeli Defense Minister Peretz ordered the eviction of settlers who had moved into buildings in central Hebron in February, but that order has not yet been implemented. Despite the obligation of the Government of Israel under the Road Map, none of the additional 101 outposts in the West Bank has been removed. In addition, Israel continues to construct the wall in the West Bank, ignoring the 9 July 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Despite commitments by the Government of Israel to ease movement in the West Bank, a total of 547 physical obstacles to movement were in place as of 3 April 2007 — up from the 529 obstacles cited in our last report.

For Gaza, access through Karni has improved slightly since our last report. The crossing was open every scheduled day, but only for 43 per cent of the scheduled opening hours. Approximately 10 per cent of the ultimate target set by the Agreement on Movement and Access — 400 truckloads of exported goods per day — was reached. Movement through Rafah improved, as it was open 42 per cent of the time — up from 27 per cent during the last reporting period. The targets set out in the Agreement on Movement and Access, to which Israel has committed, must be reached if there is to be an improvement in the socio-economic situation of the Gaza Strip.

United Nations staff members and other humanitarian workers crossing from Gaza into Israel are subjected to increasingly arbitrary treatment by Israeli authorities. Internal searches of United Nations vehicles and property, including laptop computers, are conducted out of sight of United Nations staff. That practice violates United Nations security standards as well as United Nations privileges and immunities. We continue to work closely with all the relevant Israeli authorities to correct the situation, but there has been little progress thus far.

President Abbas and the new Palestinian Finance Minister have continued to underline the precarious state of Palestinian finances, including to senior European and United States officials. Donor Governments are studying various options.

There will likely be a requirement for the renewal of the temporary international mechanism beyond its current three-month mandate. I take this opportunity to remind the Council of the Quartet's call for the international community to support the mechanism, which has disbursed some $330 million to date. We also continue to urge Israel to transfer the customs and value added tax funds that have been withheld from Palestinians.

Meanwhile, immediate humanitarian issues must still be addressed. United Nations agencies continue to support populations affected by a sewage spill that killed five persons in the northern Gaza Strip on 8 April. Longer-term measures to rehabilitate the sewage plant must urgently be implemented.

I should also draw to the Council's attention the recent visit of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, to Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. During that visit, the Special Representative obtained first-hand information on the situation of children and discussed concerns with senior Government officials. She will be reporting in due course to the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

I turn now to Lebanon, where the Secretary-General has been encouraging dialogue to resolve the political impasse. Intensive efforts to ease the political

stalemate ahead of the Arab League summit in Riyadh helped to reduce tension but did not produce any breakthroughs concerning a national unity Government or the special tribunal for Lebanon. The Secretary-General made Lebanon a priority during his first visit to the region. More recently, Nicolas Michel, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, visited Lebanon and met with political leaders of all parties to discuss the statute of the tribunal, in order to advance its ratification in accord with the Lebanese Constitution. The Secretary-General will continue his efforts to encourage the implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions and to support Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, stability and security.

Lebanon remains committed to moving ahead with an important programme of political and socio-economic reform, irrespective of domestic challenges. At a recent meeting of the core group of countries that have offered their support to Lebanon, Prime Minister Siniora's Government presented a progress report on the implementation of the reform package delivered at the Paris III Conference for Lebanon. The report showed allocation of donor pledges by sector and provided an update on ongoing bilateral negotiations for the disbursement of funds. However, thus far only a small percentage of the pledges have been disbursed. We encourage donors to work with the Government of Lebanon to ensure the speedy implementation of the Paris Conference's framework of assistance.

In south Lebanon, we are pleased to note that as of 10 April, the total strength of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) stands at 13,000 peacekeepers. The Secretary-General visited UNIFIL on 31 March and noted the vital role it is playing to preserve calm along the Blue Line. That near-total calm has held since the last reporting period.

However, Israeli air violations of the Line have continued, with Israel claiming that those air violations are necessary for security measures in the face of continued breaches of the embargo on the transfer of arms, while the Government of Lebanon maintains that they are provocative actions that increase tension along the Blue Line. The United Nations will continue to assert, in the strongest terms, to both parties that one violation cannot justify another.

It is clear that the situation in the region is fragile. There are a number of elements in play that, taken together, could generate progress within the occupied Palestinian territory, between the PLO and Israel and between Israel and the Arab world. The Secretary-General is committed to nurturing these elements in close collaboration with his Quartet partners. At the same time, we are increasingly concerned that actions and inaction on the ground remain real obstacles to progress and have the potential to lead to paralysis or even a rapid deterioration. The renewed violence of the past few days shows how precarious the situation is. It is incumbent on the parties and all regional and international players to show restraint and to intensify their efforts to bring about immediate progress on the ground and to promote, as a minimum, the political will for the parties to discuss their future together. We need to move forward towards our shared goal of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace, based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

As the Council knows, in the last month, the Secretary-General has visited the Middle East twice, including Iraq, Egypt, Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and, most recently, Qatar and Syria. He has reported to the Council on his priorities and observations, and will continue to do so.

I should like to conclude this briefing by noting to the Council that the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, has informed the Secretary-General of his decision to depart the United Nations next month, after 25 years of service. In his distinguished United Nations career, Mr. de Soto has advanced the cause of peace in many places, including the Middle East, Western Sahara, Cyprus, Myanmar and El Salvador, as well as contributing to the development of United Nations conflict resolution work and practice in many areas. I am sure that the members of the Council share the Secretary-General's deep appreciation for his outstanding contribution to the United Nations and wish him well in the future.

The President: Thank you, Mr. Pascoe, for that very comprehensive briefing.

Mr. Wolff (United States of America): Recent months have seen some potentially promising developments in rebuilding the momentum necessary to advance efforts towards peace. The United States remains firmly committed to the vision of two

States — Israel and Palestine — living side by side in peace and security, and to the Road Map as the best way to achieve that goal. There is a growing consensus in support of that vision and an urgent desire to achieve it.

Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas are both committed to working towards the realization of that vision. We, the international community, should support their efforts and those of responsible regional actors who are committed to progress towards the establishment of a Palestinian State.

During the most recent visit of Secretary Rice to the region, Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas agreed to hold bi-weekly meetings to discuss practical issues such as security and movement and access, which impact the daily lives of Palestinians and Israelis. They also agreed to work on developing a political horizon. The first of those meetings was held on 15 April, and we believe that represents an important step forward on the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track. It is our hope and expectation that these regular meetings will build confidence between the parties, improve the lives of their respective peoples and lay the foundation for meaningful negotiations in the future. Palestinians must know that their State will be viable. Israelis must know that a future State of Palestine will not be a threat. While we are not yet at final status negotiations, those important issues can and should be discussed now.

The work of peace is made more complex by the posture of the Palestinian Authority Unity Government. The position of the United States and that of the Quartet is clear: we will support a Palestinian Authority Government committed to the Quartet's foundational principles of peace, renunciation of violence, recognition of Israel and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the Road Map. Those are principles upon which any Palestinian State must be founded. Its commitment to those principles must be the measure of international support for the Palestinian Authority Government. Only a Palestinian Authority Government that accepts those principles can fulfil the aspirations of the Palestinian people for a better future and a State of their own.

But there are those who wish to undermine the efforts of President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert and the international community to advance peace. It is the responsibility of the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority Government to prevent terror and take the necessary steps to stop attacks from within Gaza, and we call on them to do so. Hamas' latest rocket attacks and breach of the ceasefire send a clear signal that it is not prepared to support progress towards peace and that Hamas is the obstacle to the Palestinian people's ability to achieve their aspirations of statehood. In that regard, we also call again for the long-overdue release of Corporal Shalit. And we also support the immediate release of BBC journalist Alan Johnston.

Beyond the parties themselves, the international community, particularly States in the region, should commit itself to helping the parties succeed. The Arab League's reaffirmation in Riyadh in March of the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative offers the prospect of a regional political horizon for Israel to complement the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian track. Just as Israelis and Palestinians should clarify a political horizon together, so should the Arab States clarify a political horizon for Israel. Those two tracks are not substitutes one for the other; indeed they reinforce each other.

We welcome the 18 April meeting of the Arab League Follow-up Committee. Its decision to charge Egypt and Jordan with outreach to Israel on the Initiative is a good first step, and it is important that this dialogue expand in the future to include more Arab States.

Turning to Lebanon, the United States remains committed to a sovereign, democratic and prosperous Lebanon. We continue to call for the full implementation of all Security Council resolutions pertaining to Lebanon, including 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006). And I would note that this includes the immediate release of the Israeli soldiers abducted last summer.

It remains critically important that all those involved in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and in other attacks in Lebanon since October 2004 be held accountable. We support the efforts of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission and look forward to the timely establishment of a tribunal of an international character in order to help insure that justice is done. We remain concerned by mounting evidence of the continued shipment of arms to Hizbollah and other armed groups and call on all States to enforce the arms

embargo established by Council resolution 1701 (2006).

The presidential statement of 17 April (S/PRST/2007/12)underscored the Council's resolve that the arms embargo be enforced. In that regard, we are pleased with the Council's support for the dispatch of an independent mission to assess the monitoring of the Lebanese-Syrian border. The Security Council must be united in insisting that Syria and Iran abide by their obligations under Council resolutions to respect Lebanese sovereignty and end their support for the armed militias, who pose a threat to the Lebanese State and to the stability of the region.

Mr. Biabaroh-Iboro (Congo) *(spoke in French)*: My delegation is grateful to you, Sir, for having organized this important debate on the situation in the Middle East. We thank the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Lynn Pascoe, for his briefing.

The overall picture in the Middle East today is a picture of contrasts, showing glimmers of hope and serious concern. But we have noted signs of movement that appear to be overcoming the lethargy we have seen in Palestine over many years.

On the plus side of those developments, we should note the Mecca Agreement of 8 March 2007, which my delegation welcomed as a positive event that might bring peace back to the Palestinian camp, but also, and above all, might create the appropriate conditions for relaunching a peace process between Israel and Palestine and beyond.

Even more significant in that positive trend are the conclusions of the latest summit of the League of Arab States, held in Riyadh on 28 and 29 March 2007, which revived the Arab Peace Initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002. The activation of this peace plan would allow for Israel to return all the occupied Arab territories in return for its recognition by the Arab States, which would lead, in time, to the creation of a Palestinian State and to the establishment of normal diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arab world. That in turn would contribute to the long-term peace and security of Israel.

We welcome those advances and support the various diplomatic démarches and initiatives undertaken to that end, particularly by the Quartet on the Middle East and by the States of the Arab League. We should also welcome the willingness to undertake dialogue shown at the highest level by the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, illustrated both by the now regular and sustained meetings between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas and by the generally positive tone of their remarks.

It seems that a time for dialogue and relaunching the negotiation process is imminent. We feel that the main protagonists in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis should demonstrate patience, self-control, flexibility and creativity so as not to allow this window of opportunity, offered to us at the present moment, to close again.

The Palestinian and Israeli authorities, with the necessary support from the international community and particularly from the Quartet, perhaps expanded to the countries of the region, should promote and strengthen confidence-building measures with respect to the following imperatives.

They should put an end to violence and to the recurring provocations and should preserve the ceasefire concluded between the two parties in November 2006, which should be extended to the West Bank. That involves stopping the continuing firing of rockets into Israel and the cordoning off of territories and incursions by the Israeli army into occupied territories, which endanger the lives of civilian populations.

They should ensure that the Israeli soldier held by Palestinian armed factions is released and give serious consideration to the problem of the numerous Palestinian prisoners in Israel, among them ministers and members of parliament.

They should lift the suspension of direct financial aid to the Palestinian National Unity Government and hand back assets from customs duties and taxes that Israel is unjustifiably withholding. Circulation and access for goods and persons at the crossing points at Karni and Rafah between Israel and the Palestinian territories should be improved. Settlement activities and the building of the separation wall — which is in violation of international legality — should be stopped.

With regard to Lebanon, the precarious situation that country is facing socially, politically and economically is made even more complicated with the project to set up a tribunal of an international character, which is a source of division among the different Lebanese political factions. We encourage the

Lebanese political authorities to once more seek, through national dialogue, consensual solutions to the many challenges that that country, so damaged by the war in the summer of 2006, has to face.

In addition, in the light of the complex situation in Lebanon and what is at stake domestically and regionally, we think that any pursuit of a lasting solution to the Lebanese crisis will have to involve Lebanon's neighbouring countries. In this regard, Congo await with interest the follow-up to visits in the region by the Secretary-General and his colleagues, whose commitment we support with a view to helping the Lebanese people to recover peace, which is an essential condition for the reconstruction of Lebanon.

Mr. Lacroix (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, let me thank Mr. Lynn Pascoe for his briefing.

In recent weeks, several events of great importance have occurred in the Middle East, events that have strengthened the positive movement that began to emerge at the end of last year and at the beginning of this year. I am thinking first of the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government on 17 March. France, which had long wished for this, welcomes this development, as it might end the spiral of inter-Palestinian violence and relaunch the peace process. We wish to pay tribute in particular to President Abbas' efforts, which led to this agreement between Hamas and Fatah. That is the message that the President of the French Republic conveyed to him during his recent visit to France.

France would also hail here the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative during the summit of the League of Arab States in Riyadh on 29 March last. In our view, it constitutes an essential basis for any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Lastly, France welcomes the continuation of contacts between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who met in Jerusalem on 15 April and who are due to meet again soon in Jericho. It is important to make the most of these contacts, not only to find practical answers to the daily suffering of the Palestinian people, but also to revive a genuine political process.

In this context, France strongly deplores the resumption of violence that we have seen these past few days in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. We condemn the Israeli army operations that have left nine people dead, including two teenagers this weekend in the West Bank and in Gaza. Likewise, we condemn the rocket firing that continues to target Israeli territory almost daily, in violation of the truce. The recent statements by the armed wing of Hamas are very disturbing from this point of view. We call on the two sides not to enter again into a spiral of violence, but instead to maintain the truce reached in Gaza and to work for its rapid extension to the West Bank. We call on the Palestinian Government to do everything it can to ensure that the truce with Israel is respected.

What can and must the international community do to strengthen the political momentum and prevent a further exacerbation of the violence?

First, it should encourage the National Unity Government to move quickly towards full respect for the principles of the peace process as recalled by the Quartet. To do so, and without conceding any aspect of these fundamental principles, France is in favour of resuming contacts with certain members of this Government, as it did recently in receiving Foreign Minister Ziad Abu Amr. France is also in favour of resuming cooperation and direct financial aid, specifically to the Ministry of Finance. In this regard, we again call on Israel to transfer all taxes and revenues due to the Palestinian Authority.

Next, the two sides must be encouraged to set out once again on the path of negotiation, in the context of their bilateral contacts, with a view to the creation of an independent, sovereign, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side with Israel in peace and security. Confidence-building measures are expected from both parties. It is the responsibility of the international community to reaffirm its expectations. The Palestinian Authority must be relentless in fighting terrorism and must step up all its efforts to obtain the immediate release of Gilad Shalit. For its part, Israel must lift the restrictions on movement of Palestinians, release the elected Palestinian officials it is holding, freeze all settlement activities and end construction of the wall of separation within the Palestinian territory.

Lastly, France considers it indispensable to strengthen the momentum that started at Riyadh. On the basis of this initiative, the international community must encourage the parties to define, in relation with the Ad Hoc Follow-up Committee of the Arab League, the modalities of an effective resumption of the peace

negotiations. Israel has sent positive signals in that regard and they must be welcomed.

We also encourage the Quartet to work more intensively with the countries in the region, especially Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have a leading role to play in the promotion of peace in the Middle East. The Quartet meeting planned for May offers an opportunity to launch such cooperation on the basis of the Arab peace initiative. Subsequently, a carefully organized international conference could give the parties the guarantees they need to overcome the obstacles separating them: security guarantees as well as political guarantees that would enable them to begin negotiations on fundamental questions relating to final status such as borders, natural resources, refugees and Jerusalem.

Mr. Sangqu (South Africa): We wish at the outset to thank Mr. Lynn Pascoe for his briefing.

My delegation is encouraged by the formation of a Government of national unity in Palestine, the resumption of direct talks between the Israeli Prime Minister and the President of Palestine, and the progress made towards reviving the Middle East peace process.

We welcome the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative and the subsequent formation of the Arab Ministerial Committee for that initiative, which was formed to resuscitate and promote the peace process. We look forward to direct interactions between that important Committee and the Security Council.

We urge all parties to maintain and accelerate the momentum and to ensure that the initiatives undertaken thus far translate into tangible progress leading to the establishment of an independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

It is now incumbent upon the international community to support the fully inclusive and democratic Palestinian Government, and for Israel and other countries to lift the economic and political siege on the Palestinians. Funds owing to the Palestinian National Authority and withheld by Israel, as well as other funding from the international community, are urgently required to alleviate the socio-economic hardships facing the Palestinian people and to support the deteriorating Palestinian institutions.

The international community should pause to reflect on a situation in which a crippling sanctions regime freezing Palestinian funding that was not authorized by the Security Council or the General Assembly has been imposed on only one party to a dispute. It is a matter of grave concern that those sanctions are undermining the foundations of governance in a non-independent entity that, after 40 years, is still subject to military occupation, and that they are thereby eroding prospects for a two-State solution.

My delegation notes that the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization have recently prepared a Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Assessment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The report presents a bleak account of the humanitarian situation in the occupied territories. The report notes that:

> "Without a political resolution — and particularly removal of restrictions on movement — improvement in the humanitarian situation is unlikely and millions will remain dependent on assistance."

Findings such as these illustrate the point that the United Nations has to deal with the situation in a more comprehensive manner and not merely address the humanitarian consequences of the occupation. The latest report by Professor John Dugard, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, details the systematic human rights abuses and discriminatory practices committed against the Palestinian people. Professor Dugard points out that the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid appears to have been violated by many practices, particularly those denying freedom of movement to Palestinians.

We also note with deep concern the report submitted by the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict following her recent visit to the region. The Special Representative reports on Israel's continued detention of Palestinian children and their denial of proper trials. Approximately 400 children are in detention, half of them for minor security or criminal offences.

In addition, we would like to express our grave concern at the apparent lack of progress in bringing about an exchange of prisoners between Israel and

Palestine. Thousands of Palestinian political prisoners remain in Israeli jails, and an Israeli soldier is still being held hostage by a Palestinian faction. We believe that the resolution of the issue of prisoners will contribute to the resumption of serious negotiations aimed at establishing a viable Palestinian State, existing side by side in peace with Israel, within secure and internationally recognized borders.

We are also concerned about the continued Israeli incursions in Nablus and Jenin. We urge the Palestinians to uphold the ceasefire and believe that Israel should immediately and unconditionally end all military incursions, acts of collective punishment and the expansion of settlements, and that it should halt and reverse the construction of the separation wall, as required by the international community.

Regarding the situation in Lebanon, we reiterate that all the parties must abide by their commitments under resolution 1701 (2006), in all its aspects and without selectivity. We remain concerned at the fact that Israel continues to violate Lebanese airspace with impunity, and we stress the need for progress with regard to the release of prisoners by both sides.

The key to resolving many of Lebanon's problems lies with the achievement of national reconciliation and the fair representation of all Lebanese confessional and ethnic groups in the Lebanese Government.

We stress once again that the United Nations Charter has entrusted the Security Council with the mandate to maintain international peace and security. South Africa, for its part, will be hosting the United Nations African Meeting on the Question of Palestine from 9 to 10 May 2007, and the Public Forum in Support of Israeli-Palestinian Peace on 11 May 2007, where, it is hoped, the high-level participants will generate ideas to help advance the peace process. South Africa is also willing to assist the Palestinians in their national reconciliation efforts.

Mr. Yankey (Ghana): We are grateful to Mr. Pascoe for his remarks and acknowledge the immense contribution of the outgoing Special Representative, Mr. Alvaro de Soto, to peace in the Middle East.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate on the Middle East, which is taking place against the background of recent positive developments in that complex and volatile region. We are obliged nonetheless to express concern about the immediate and long-term ramifications of the ongoing violence in Iraq, especially the fate of internally displaced Iraqis and of refugees. We also hope most sincerely that the dispute over Iran's nuclear enrichment programme will be resolved through dialogue.

My delegation is very much encouraged by the renewed contacts between the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Ehud Olmert, and the Palestinian President, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, and we take this occasion to call for an immediate restoration of the truce between Hamas and Israel in order not to jeopardize this new opportunity for peace. It is also important to emphasize the need for the Quartet and other influential stakeholders to take whatever steps are required to reinforce the confidence-building initiatives undertaken by the two sides, including pressing for the immediate release of all hostages and prisoners, where appropriate — and we support the call for the release of the BBC journalist — as well as addressing the grave humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories and the refugee camps.

Against that background, we wish to reiterate our full support for the Mecca accord, brokered by Saudi Arabia and other Arab leaders to bring an end to the deeply troubling armed clashes between Fatah and Hamas. We urge the Palestinians to endeavour to resolve their differences through dialogue so that they can present a peaceful and united front in seeking an independent and viable State of their own.

Further, we welcome the Arab peace plan and believe that it broadens the basis for a negotiated settlement to the Palestinian question. We trust that the Government of Israel will give due consideration to the peace plan, which, together with the Road Map and other existing agreements, ought to provide a workable framework for negotiating a just and durable peace between Israel and its neighbours. There can be no doubt that until it is resolved, the age-old conflict in the Middle East will continue to cast a shadow over the rest of the world.

In his latest reports on the situation between Lebanon and Israel, the Secretary-General recorded significant progress in the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), particularly the commitment to dialogue demonstrated by the two countries. We commend the

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon for its efforts to facilitate the implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions.

On the other hand, we should be mindful of the various threats to peace that have been highlighted, including the internal political situation in Lebanon, the unresolved dispute over the Sheba'a farms, the reported breaches of resolution 1701 (2006) by the two sides and other provocative incidents. We welcome the efforts being made to clear the cluster bombs and unexploded ordnance that have claimed the lives of several Lebanese nationals and injured many others. We wish to echo the appeal by the Secretary-General to the two sides to abide by their commitments under resolution 1701 (2006) in order to preserve the peace.

My delegation is very keen to see tangible progress in the search for peace and stability in the Middle East, including, inter alia, the realization of an independent and viable Palestinian State in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and related agreements. The stark reality is that our collective security is inextricably bound together with the future of the region. That places on us all an urgent responsibility to move beyond the status quo.

Mr. Al-Bader (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): I should like at the outset to thank Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his excellent briefing to the Security Council.

The Council is meeting today at a time when we genuinely hope that its work will be results-oriented and will revive the peace process in the Middle East. As all members are well aware, since the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict there has been no shortage of diplomatic initiatives or resolutions of international legitimacy — embodied by the Security Council and the General Assembly — aimed at a settlement. What we have lacked is the political will necessary to achieve peace.

Today, after all those efforts, the crisis in our region remains at the highest level of intensity and continues unabated. We are witnessing the bloodshed of innocent people and the destruction of their homes, which in turn are causing further frustration and despair. The logical outcome of that situation is a deepening feeling of hatred and resentment, which takes the form of an ongoing cycle of violence.

Some believe that Palestinian violence is the reason for the continuation of the crisis and that ending it is the way to achieve peace. Such an approach is extremely simplistic and could not be further removed from reality. The root causes of the violence must be addressed. To that end, we should approach the issue from an inclusive perspective, avoiding selectivity and prejudgements. Restoring rights to those legally entitled to them is the most viable and effective way to extinguish the fires of hatred and to eliminate the main pretext used by extremists.

We in the State of Qatar believe that a lasting and comprehensive settlement is within reach but that it can be achieved only through concessions. It is only by making those concessions that we can ensure security and prosperity for the peoples of the region. We have adopted a comprehensive and integrated approach to the crisis in the Middle East by calling for an end to the hostilities and mitigating their impact on the peoples of the region, including by launching high-level diplomatic efforts at both the Arab and international levels and by calling on the Security Council to revive the dormant Middle East peace process on all tracks, within the previously agreed frameworks.

Through their recent support for the path of peace, Arab leaders have shown a sincere intention to reach a just settlement in order to bring security to all States of the region. Forming the Palestinian Government of National Unity will remove one of the obstacles to the resumption of the peace process and will create a political climate conducive to pushing the peace process forward. It is therefore in everyone's interest that such a Palestinian Government be able to carry out the vital function of providing its population with security and basic services. We call here on the Government and the people of Israel to take advantage of these positive developments and resume direct and serious negotiations on all tracks. We also call on the States and other parties concerned to lift their embargo against the Palestinian people so that the Palestinian Government can carry out the functions required by the peace process.

Preserving the stability, security and sovereignty of Lebanon is of the utmost importance if we are to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East as a whole. Lebanon still needs support from the international community in order to overcome the devastating effects of the latest war waged against it by

Israel. We in the State of Qatar believe that respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, non-interference by all parties in its internal affairs, an end to Israel's almost-daily violations of Lebanese airspace and a withdrawal by Israel from the remaining occupied Lebanese territories would ensure the stability of the security situation in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006).

We continue to look forward to a settlement of the status of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967. That issue is a very important component of the Middle East situation, and resolving it would decrease the tensions in the region. Resuming the negotiations between the parties concerned is the best way to implement the relevant Security Council resolutions and to resolve that issue.

Mr. Matulay (Slovakia): At the outset, I should like to join previous speakers in thanking Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing. I also extend my thanks to you, Mr. President, for organizing and chairing today's debate. We are pleased that Minister of State Howells was able to open the debate.

Recently, we have been witnessing a very useful and constructive exchange of ideas regarding the developments in the Middle East, both here in the Security Council and in the region — accompanied, moreover, by relentless efforts and concrete steps undertaken by international and regional actors to revive the peace process. Slovakia is encouraged by those developments and shares the prevailing sense that more progress is needed in promoting a comprehensive and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular.

Although the results achieved remain modest — and we have noted the concerns expressed by Mr. Pascoe about the security situation — we believe that important and positive momentum has already been built. That momentum must be seized and further enhanced through concrete and immediate action, including confidence-building measures.

In that regard, we are encouraged by the outcome of the Arab League Summit held last month in Riyadh and the positive reactions to it by many key actors, including Israel. We support the reaffirmed Arab Peace Initiative as a major element in moving the peace process forward, and we welcome the recent decision by the Arab Ministerial Committee indicating increased engagement with a view to establishing a constructive dialogue between Israel and the Arab side.

We welcome the meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on 15 April reflecting and fulfilling their commitment to meet on a regular basis. We consider such direct talks to be instrumental and decisive in solving the many complex issues of the dispute. We hope and expect that such discussions between the two leaders will continue with the aim not only of contributing to the effective and sustainable solution of many day-to-day problems, but also of leading to meaningful negotiations on the final status and peace settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. We remain convinced that such a settlement can and should be achieved only through peaceful negotiations and the full implementation of all relevant Security Council resolutions and the principles defined by the Quartet and the road map.

In that regard, we are convinced that the Quartet still represents the most appropriate mechanism for advancing the peace process and the road map to be the most efficient plan for achieving a lasting peace settlement to the conflict. Speaking of the Quartet and its role, we have repeatedly encouraged the Palestinians to seize the moment of national unity to form a Government that would be committed to the Quartet principles and whose political platform would enable early engagement as well as the continuation of dialogue on a solution to the Middle East conflict. We continue to evaluate the policy and actions of the Palestinian National Unity Government and express our readiness to cooperate with those of its members who reflect and accept those principles.

As for daily developments on the ground, we remain concerned over the economic and humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Slovakia therefore welcomes the extension of the Temporary International Mechanism for a further three months, which will enable resources to be channelled and assistance delivered directly to the Palestinian people. To that end, we urge Israel to resume transfers of withheld Palestinian tax and customs revenues, directly or through the Mechanism. We also call for the full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access and for all border crossings to be reopened and remain open.

We reiterate our call for an immediate end to violence by Palestinian factions as well as attacks on Israel, notably the launching of rockets against Israeli population centres, and for the release of the abducted Israeli soldier Shalit and BBC reporter Johnston. We support the efforts and leadership of President Abbas in that regard and commend also the efforts of partners in the region to that end. We also hope and expect Israel and Palestinians to exercise the utmost restraint and to do everything possible to sustain and further consolidate the mutually agreed ceasefire in Gaza.

For its part, we expect the Israeli Government to continue its commitment to peace based on principles laid out in the road map and to refrain from taking such steps and activities that might be contradictory to the principles of international law.

I now turn to Lebanon. Slovakia continues to closely follow developments in that country and we remain concerned. The country faces a number of challenges. There is an urgent need for the situation to be stabilized and for the end of the current deadlock, which we believe serves no one's interests. Lebanon needs to be reconstructed and further developed, and that can be done only in a peaceful and stable environment.

We are convinced that the comprehensive national dialogue is the only way to find a consensus on a number of issues. The presidential statement that we adopted last week is, in our view, an important signal that the international community, and especially the Security Council, is paying serious attention to the whole region. It also underlined the need for progress in a number of areas, including on the issue of the release of two Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hizbollah last July. Steps towards confidence building have to be undertaken by all relevant actors inside and outside Lebanon.

The sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Lebanon have to be respected by everybody. Resolution 1701 (2006) presents a good basis for a comprehensive solution, and it has to be fully respected and implemented by all relevant actors. The Israeli overflights have to stop, the Lebanese Government has to have the sole monopoly on the use of force within its territory, and the Lebanese authorities and army have to strengthen their position and authority throughout the whole country, with special focus on border control, in order to successfully implement the arms embargo in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006). Resolution 1559 (2004) on the disarmament of all militia in Lebanon has to be implemented as well.

Finally, we believe that the normalization of relations between neighbours in the region would significantly contribute to the stabilization of the situation throughout the Middle East. There is a need not only for justice, but also for compromise and good will from all relevant sides. Only thus, through dialogue and cooperation, can the solution be found, step by step, to all outstanding issues.

Mr. Voto-Bernales (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Pascoe for his detailed briefing this morning.

My delegation continues hopefully to monitor the process launched on 17 March, when a National Unity Government was finally established in Palestine under the leadership of President Abbas. That was an important step towards creating a climate of understanding. Peru endorses the call made by the Quartet on 21 March for the Palestinian Government in all its actions to meet its obligations to stem the violence, recognize Israel and respect previous agreements and obligations, including the road map.

Effective administration in the occupied Palestinian territory is needed to contain the violence and avoid the further deterioration of daily life. That includes the ability to end the constant firing of rockets against civilian targets in Israel and to stop arms trafficking inside Gaza. Such activities prevent the necessary mobilization of international assistance to help reverse the serious economic situation affecting Palestinians in the occupied territories.

For its part, Israel must also take effective steps, in particular by suspending the construction of new settlements in the occupied territories and by beginning to dismantle the separation wall there, the existence of which is contrary to international law and the spirit of peaceful coexistence. Israel must also act, without endangering its own security, to allow the free movement of Palestinian civilians, which will help to ease tensions and facilitate economic activity.

The parties absolutely must develop policies converging on the ultimate objective of the process, which is the holding of negotiations leading to the end of the occupation and the establishment of two States living side by side in peace. In that regard, we

commend the meetings held by Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas, who have reached a number of practical arrangements on humanitarian, security and freedom of movement issues that build confidence and promote broader dialogue and negotiation. My delegation welcomes such positive signals and the political will of both leaders to set off on a path that may lead to peace, with the active support of the United Nations and important international partners.

In that respect, we recognize the Quartet as the most appropriate mechanism for mobilizing all actors to seek dialogue and the establishment of firm agreements. We would highlight the initiatives taken by the members of the Quartet, in particular the Secretary-General, whose presence in the region in recent days and last March has been most valuable and reaffirms the United Nations resolve to urge the process forward. The steps taken by the United States Secretary of State to bring the parties together have also been useful and opened important channels for dialogue. Furthermore, it is necessary to continue encouraging the active and constructive participation of the Arab States in the process that was relaunched at the most recent summit of the League of Arab States in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

With regard to Lebanon, we are concerned at ongoing activities that hinder the work of the democratically elected Lebanese Government and its efforts to restore the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of that country. That has most certainly impeded the implementation of substantive elements of resolution 1701 (2006).

We support the activities of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and its guiding role in preventing any act from turning into undesirable confrontation. With regard to the area included within UNIFIL's mandate, success is clearly linked to continued capacity-building for the Lebanese Armed Forces. We must not lose sight of the importance of the arms embargo and of disarming the militias. Cooperation will be needed from neighbouring countries and other countries of the region to put an end to arms trafficking, but it is vital also that the Lebanese State recover its monopoly on the use of force in its own territory.

Finally, we trust that following the visit by the United Nations Legal Counsel it will be possible, in conformity with Lebanon's internal constitutional procedures, to approve the establishment of a special international tribunal to bring to justice those responsible for the terrorist attack that took the life of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Here, it is necessary for all Lebanese authorities to respect the commitments that have been undertaken, as they have been repeatedly requested to do by the international community.

My delegation endorses Under-Secretary-General Pascoe's acknowledgement of the important contribution made by Mr. Alvaro de Soto as Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority. We join in paying tribute to him for his distinguished service to the United Nations and for his commitment to the supreme cause of peace.

Mr. Belle (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

Let me begin with a few comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We are now in an interim phase. The year 2006 saw the situation deteriorate, while 2007 has given us reason for hope. Direct dialogue between the parties has resumed with regular summit meetings; the regional players have renewed their commitment, as evidenced by the Mecca Agreement and the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative; and the international community, in particular the Quartet, has renewed its involvement. But hope remains fragile, and to avoid any backsliding all the players must work together and translate their dialogue into concrete action.

I turn first to the parties. Belgium supports President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert in their intention to meet regularly, which should enable them to restore mutual trust and to make progress that their respective peoples will feel in terms of improved living conditions and security. But such interim issues should not overshadow the real need for discussion of the future: how to achieve a solution based on two States living side by side in peace and security. Too frequently, the past has shown us that, for lack of credible political vision, deeply-felt desires have led nowhere. In the meantime, Belgium calls upon the Israeli and Palestinian Governments to make every effort to maintain and consolidate the Gaza ceasefire agreed upon in November 2006. The continued firing of rockets, the recent violent confrontations and

statements made in the past few days are all of great concern in that regard. The goal must continue to be to maintain the ceasefire and extend it throughout the occupied territories.

We welcomed the establishment of a Palestinian Government of National Unity as a positive development, and we expect its programme and, above all, in its actions to reflect the change of course agreed upon at Mecca and a willingness to reflect the Quartet principles. In Belgium's view, security sector reform must be a priority for the Palestinian Government, the Palestinian presidency and the international community. Moreover, we call upon the Israeli Government to make powerful symbolic gestures with a view to strengthening the current bilateral discussion by returning Palestinian tax and customs revenues and by ceasing the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories and the construction of the separation wall beyond the Green Line.

Turning to the role of regional actors, Belgium joins the Secretary-General in welcoming the proactive efforts of the Arab countries, as seen at the Riyadh Summit. We encourage this active role, which since that Summit has been reflected in last week's Cairo ministerial-level decision to establish working groups to explore, together with international actors and with Israel, the contribution of the Arab Peace Initiative and ways of reviving the Middle East peace process. Here, Belgium welcomes the Quartet's renewed commitment to play its role as a catalyst for the efforts of the international community, in particular through increased cooperation with regional actors.

With respect to Lebanon, we do not want this dangerous situation to continue without a response. All of us, in Lebanon and elsewhere, must work to safeguard the country's stability and sovereignty. We therefore call upon all Lebanese political players to act responsibly by making it possible for State institutions to function normally with a view to buttressing that sovereignty. We share the view of the Secretary-General, as expressed in his recent report (S/2007/147) on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), that deployment of UNIFIL and of the Lebanese army south of the Litani river has brought about genuine strategic changes. These changes give rise to hope, but resolution 1701 (2006) is a complex machine that must remain in motion. The Secretary-General has a central role to play in maintaining this momentum. Here, we welcome the consensus reached in the Security Council last week in support of the Secretary-General's proposals, specifically the dispatch, with the consent of the Lebanese Government, of an independent assessment mission to monitor the border.

In conclusion, because of our common concern for the stability of Lebanon and the fight against impunity, we look forward with interest to a report on the mission of support for the Lebanese parties led by Mr. Nicolas Michel, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The Chinese delegation thanks Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

Recently there have been signs that tension is easing in the Middle East situation, and this could give rise to new opportunities. The League of Arab States has held a summit meeting, at which it decided to relaunch the Arab Peace Initiative. President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority and Prime Minister Olmert of Israel have begun to hold regular meetings. The international community has intensified its good offices on Middle East issues. This undoubtedly constitutes a good start for reviving the Middle East peace process, which has been stalled for many years. China considers that, given this situation, all parties should seize this historic opportunity to step up their cooperation, actively encourage peace and engage in talks, so as to promote the achievement of new progress in the Middle East peace process. For the present we should focus our attention on the following areas.

First, Palestine and Israel should establish mutual trust and accommodate each other's concerns. Such trust has been sorely lacking in recent years, and this has severely hindered progress in the Middle East peace process. There is an urgent need to take advantage of reduced tension and increase efforts to heighten confidence and dissipate mistrust. Israel should halt its construction of settlements and the separation wall, while Palestinians should end rocket attacks against Israel. The two parties should also find an early solution to the issue of releasing each other's prisoners.

Secondly, the two parties should work towards the early resumption of full talks. The leaders of both parties should fully utilize the biweekly meeting mechanism to address, first of all, issues regarding the living conditions of both peoples, which is their primary concern. They should seek an appropriate

solution to security and development issues of concern to both parties, and should reduce their peoples' mutual hatred and establish a harmonious, positive environment. Both parties should seize this opportunity to return to comprehensive talks.

Thirdly, the international community should support the Arab Peace Initiative, which Arab countries decided to relaunch at their Summit in March. That strategic choice illustrates their expectation and desire for peace and demonstrates their commitment and willingness to work comprehensively, through peaceful means and in accordance with relevant international agreements, to achieve a resolution of their disputes and conflicts with Israel. That is a positive message for Israel and the international community. We believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict can be resolved only through peace talks between Arab countries and Israel. The two parties should work together to improve relations and enhance the prospects for contact.

Fourthly, the international community should help the parties concerned to achieve speedy improvement in the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. As a result of economic sanctions and the embargo, the humanitarian and economic situation in the occupied territories is deteriorating, with people living in disastrous conditions. The international community should take substantive steps to ease the humanitarian crisis faced by the Palestinian people.

China is also very concerned about developments in the situation in Lebanon. We hope that all political parties in Lebanon can enjoy unity, resolve their internal differences through negotiations and reach agreement on such major issues as the soonest possible establishment of a special tribunal to consider the Hariri case. Maintaining national unity, independence and territorial integrity and achieving unity among the people, national harmony and development are entirely the responsibility of the Lebanese people. We hope that Lebanon will make progress in achieving political reconciliation. The international community can offer the necessary assistance, but too much pressure and intervention will only add fuel to the fire, and will not be conducive to solving problems.

China has always firmly believed that the Palestinian-Israeli issue can be properly resolved only on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions, the principle of land for peace and political negotiations to establish an independent Palestinian State living side by side peacefully with Israel. That is in the interest of the peoples of Palestine, Israel and all the other countries of the Middle East. It will also facilitate the achievement of peace and security in the region. China will continue to support all efforts that can contribute to the réalization of that goal. We also favour a greater role for the Security Council in that regard.

Mr. Suescum (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): We would like to thank you, Mr. President, and your delegation, for organizing today's debate. We also wish to thank Mr. Pascoe for the information he provided to the Council today.

Since our last debate on this item, several political initiatives by regional and international actors — in particular the United States, Saudi Arabia, the League of Arab States and the Secretary-General — have kept the Middle East peace process alive. Last month's Arab Summit was a productive one. We support the renewed commitment of the region to the Arab Peace Initiative, whose basic principle — land for peace — could prove to be an important factor in establishing lasting peace between Israel and its neighbours. We urge the Palestinian Authority to officially endorse the Initiative. Such acceptance would facilitate the diplomatic work of those engaged in the peace process by sending a clear signal to the international community that the entire Palestinian people is committed to a solution based on two States living side by side in peace and security.

The efforts made by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have also been important. As a result of those efforts, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have decided to meet every two weeks. Although those meetings have not yet produced practical results, the alternative of not meeting would constitute yet another impediment to reaching a fair solution to the Palestinian issue and the problems of the entire region.

We are concerned that those discussions could result only in gestures that could in the end be empty, if the parties do not take advantage of them to discuss the most central issues that are impeding a peace agreement. Those issues pertain to the borders of a Palestinian State, refugees and jurisdiction over Jerusalem. In particular, the parties must move towards

a definition of a political horizon that will give the Palestinian and Israeli peoples something to hope for in the future. That would make it easier for all Palestinian factions to commit themselves to the peace process.

Events on the ground continue to prevent the establishment of an atmosphere conducive to fostering trust among the parties and to a final peace agreement. Continued attacks from Gaza by Palestinian militants threaten Israeli civilians on an almost daily basis. The kidnappings of Corporal Gilad Shalit and BBC correspondent Alan Johnston — along with the absence of proof that Mr. Johnston is still alive — have created a climate of insecurity in Palestinian territory and demonstrate that some Palestinian factions have very little desire for peace. We urge that the two kidnapping victims be freed without delay or preconditions.

Unilateral actions by the Israeli Government deprive Palestinians of normal lives and hinder the peace process. In some cases, those actions amount to violations of human rights and international law. Repeated deadly incursions into Palestinian territory, such as the one that occurred this past weekend, lead to the deaths of innocent Palestinian civilians. We reiterate our request to Israel that it halt its military incursions into Palestinian territory. We also call upon the Palestinian Authority, and in particular the Hamas Government, to urge factions to be prudent and respectful of the ceasefire with Israel. We welcome initial reports that that has already occurred, but we wish to reiterate that the political commitment of the Palestinian Authority to the peace process will not be credible if the Palestinian Authority cannot prevent acts of violence carried out by their armed factions.

We are still concerned about the precarious conditions in which Palestinians are living in some parts of the occupied territory. Restrictions on movement of persons and the building of illegal settlements in the territories are serious violations of human rights and of international law, and they exacerbate the frustration of the Palestinian people over the occupation. On top of all that is a peace process that is not taking off. All that erodes the trust of the Palestinians in Israel and their expectations that a solution to their statehood will be found through a political process.

We urge the Israeli Government to relax the restrictive measures they have imposed on the Palestinian people in the occupied territory, including East Jerusalem. We also urge the Israeli Government to end restrictions on movement, in particular to stop the construction of the illegal separation wall — that should be dismantled — in order to give some kind of normality to the lives of Palestinians.

With regard to Lebanon, we are concerned about the ongoing political stalemate, despite some hopeful signs of dialogue among the parties. We urge the parties to continue with those efforts. We repeat that peace in Lebanon must go through a political process for national unity and that that in turn will require the establishment of the special international tribunal.

We deplore actions on the ground and in the air that violate Security Council resolutions and block the road to peace.

Finally, we wish to join the chorus of congratulations and thanks to Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his great work.

Mr. Montovani (Italy): Mr. Howells, I first wish to welcome you and thank you for being with us in the Council today and presiding over this meeting. I also wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

Recent weeks have recorded promising developments in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Following the establishment of the National Unity Government and direct contacts between the Palestinian Authority President and the Israeli Prime Minister, the Arab League has offered the peace process a perspective that should not be neglected. The proposal that emerged from the Riyadh summit to revive the 2002 Beirut plan represents an interesting basis for negotiations, one which might bring the political process closer to defining the parametres required for transition to the final phase of the Road Map.

We are pleased by the positive attitude taken by the Israeli Government towards the Arab League's decision to request Egypt and Jordan to study the modalities for defining the terms of application of the proposal relaunched by the Riyadh summit. Italy has long felt the need to increase the number of countries that support the peace process and considers the involvement of Arab countries useful to enhance the prospects of a regional solution to the conflict. We are confident that the contacts to that end among Israel, Egypt and Jordan will help to gradually bring positions

closer together. We hope that the parties will show the flexibility and good will needed to start an effective dialogue.

Italy confirms its support for the Road Map principles and at the same time reiterates that their implementation must take into account the need to quickly progress toward a just and conclusive solution. In that framework, we continue to fully support the role of the Quartet, and of the European Union within it, to foster successful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

We are very concerned by the statements released by some Palestinian factions that intend to put an end to the truce in Gaza, which has substantially held so far. Such statements, should they be followed by acts, risk igniting a dangerous spiral of violence that could endanger the slow progress achieved so far. It will therefore be essential that the Palestinian Government strongly commit to ending any violent attack, the launching of Qassam rockets, weapons smuggling in Gaza and the detention of Corporal Shalit.

At the same time, we believe that Israel should take concrete action to loosen restrictions on the freedom of movement of the Palestinian people, particularly in the West Bank, so that the access of people and goods to the Gaza Strip is no longer blocked, particularly at the Rafah crossing point. Israel should also rapidly resume the transfer of customs revenues to the Palestinian Government. In that framework, we hope that the necessary conditions can be assured for the European Union Border Assistance Mission to resume its operations in full.

It is equally important that both parties strive to avoid actions or take positions that might be ill interpreted by public opinion and could generate tensions likely to hinder or to halt the dialogue. It is vital that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority work to avoid any action that might jeopardize the fragile dialogue that has been established.

While we believe the meetings between President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert hold promise, one must avoid giving the Palestinian public the impression that it is mere media hype, without any tangible impact on their living conditions in the territories.

That is another reason why we believe that Israel should seize the opportunity to revive, with conviction, the dialogue with President Abbas, whose responsibility over peace negotiations is clearly recognized in the programme of the new Palestinian Government — although within the limit that any agreement would have to be ratified by the Palestinian National Council or by referendum.

In that context, it is crucial to foster the economic reconstruction of the Palestinian territories and to ease the rehabilitation of the fabric of Palestinian society — a task in which the European Union has distinguished itself in recent months through its assistance to the Palestinian people.

Regarding Lebanon, we are concerned by the sensitivity of the political situation there, which continues to be highly complex and closely tied to the solution of the two main interrelated questions: the establishment of the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination, and the national unity Government. We are convinced that the political impasse that grips the country can be broken only through a courageous assumption of political responsibility by all the Lebanese parties. We therefore once again urge the Government and the opposition to resolutely resume the dialogue to address and resolve the political problems of the country at their roots.

We are convinced of the need to establish the international tribunal. Nevertheless, at this sensitive juncture in the Lebanese political process, we need to be aware of the repercussions that a more incisive action by the international community might have on the domestic framework.

What must re-emerge in Lebanon first and foremost is the will to revive the national dialogue so as to address the root causes of the country's political problems, which have brought about the present institutional impasse. Italy thus believes that the resumption of dialogue between the majority and the opposition must be encouraged and consolidated as the prerequisite for an agreement that will bring Lebanon out of the difficult political crisis.

The international community is deeply engaged in the stabilization of the country, and the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in southern Lebanon is a guarantee of that commitment by the international community. We are concerned, however, that a solution still seems to be far off on some key issues regarding the normalization of bilateral relations between Lebanon and Israel,

especially the release of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers, the Sheba'a Farms and Israeli overflights in Lebanon.

On various occasions, UNIFIL has proven its ability to intervene promptly and effectively to defuse tensions on the Israeli-Lebanese border that risked spiralling into a dangerous situation. We believe that the tripartite mechanism comprised of UNIFIL, the Lebanese armed forces and the Israeli Defense Forces is particularly useful for resolving possible controversies, and we urge the parties to continue to make regular use of that mechanism. We encourage the parties to proceed expeditiously, in cooperation with UNIFIL, towards a more accurate demarcation of the Blue Line, with a view also to preventing the recurrence of incidents along the Line.

In this regard, we believe that it is essential to clearly define the question of the Sheba'a farms, which continues to represent a dangerous source of tension along the border between the two countries. We appreciate the work carried out in recent months by the United Nations cartographers and hope that a proposal may soon be drafted which would provide the basis for political consultations.

We are concerned by reports that weapons continue to be smuggled into Lebanon, especially outside UNIFIL's area of operations, despite the ban provided for by resolution 1701 (2006). We have confidence in the commitment of the Lebanese Armed Forces to prevent arms smuggling, but it is fundamental that all the neighbouring countries commit themselves to preventing an increase in the destructive potential of the various opposing Lebanese factions.

We believe that it is important that the United Nations engage itself on this question. With this in mind, we extended support to the Secretary-General's proposal to send an independent mission in order to assess the monitoring of the Lebanese border with respect to weapons trafficking and to make recommendations, a proposal that the Security Council endorsed in the presidential statement adopted on 17 April (S/PRST/2007/12).

We deem it important that Syria genuinely engage itself in this respect. Damascus can play a positive role in the stability and development of the region, but only if it confirms in deeds its will to act in good faith and in the interests of peace. In this regard, we look forward to learning about the outcome of the recent visit of the Secretary-General to Damascus.

The full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) is primarily the responsibility of the Lebanese Government. We are aware, however, of the difficulties encountered by the Lebanese Armed Forces due to the lack of equipment and inadequate training to carry out some of the fundamental tasks provided for by the resolution, particularly with regard to the prevention of arms smuggling. It is essential that we start thinking soon about how to help the Lebanese Armed Forces achieve adequate standards in terms of training, equipment and resources.

Mr. Dolgov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We too are grateful to Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing on the situation with regard to the Middle East peace process.

In recent months, considerable noteworthy developments have taken place in the Middle East. It is important to continue to influence the local situation, taking advantage of the momentum generated by the Arab Summit held in Riyadh. The decisions taken there have created a propitious environment for stabilizing the Middle East peace process. The coming period will see very intensive contacts, pursuant to the decision taken in Saudi Arabia, among parties including the Quartet, which involves Russian participation, regional partners and other interested parties. We anticipate positive results from the regular ministerial meeting of the Quartet to be held in May.

We welcome the robust efforts of the Secretary-General to help bring about a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East. We look forward to hearing his ideas on the outcome of his recent visit to the region. We welcome the Secretary-General's positive assessment of the talks held in Damascus.

There is a need to make use of this favourable overall situation in order to move forward with specific efforts to revive the Arab-Israeli dialogue on all tracks, in particular on the Israeli-Syrian track, and to raise the exchanges of views between the Palestinian National Authority and the Israeli Government to the level of substantive negotiations. Clearly, all of that will require considerable efforts. The main thing is that this work be undertaken collectively, with the participation of all interested parties.

Despite these positive trends, the situation in that region continues to be very complex. That is due above all to the security situation in the Palestinian territories. The parties need to show the utmost restraint,

implement their relevant obligations and prevent any actions that could undermine the process.

On 18 April, there was a meeting of the Arab League Ministerial Committee to follow up the Arab Peace Initiative. Russia has responded positively to the outcome of that meeting. We attach great importance to the League's establishment of a working mechanism to establish a substantive dialogue in which all interested parties, including the relevant Egyptian and Jordanian authorities, will have direct contacts with Israel in order to find a way to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.

That is the very approach that Russia, as a permanent member of the Security Council and a member of the Quartet of international mediators on peace in the Middle East, has consistently advocated. We will continue to support movement towards a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement that would, of course, be reciprocal and would take into account the concerns of both sides and towards a search for genuine solutions that would have a legal basis.

Moscow has drawn attention to the statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, which hosted the recent meeting of Arab States, favouring a United Nations-sponsored conference on the Middle East with the participation of the international community, regional players and the parties themselves. This proposal is consonant with the well-known Russian initiative on convening an international conference on the Middle East. We are certain that this would make it possible to resume the peace process in the region on all tracks with a view to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The situation in Lebanon unfortunately continues to be very complex, because in parliament the majority Lebanese Government and the opposition parties have not reached a consensus on the two key issues: formation of a national unity government and the establishment of an international tribunal on the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri. We urge the Lebanese people to continue their efforts to achieve the central goal of maintaining national consensus, which means ensuring that Lebanon retains its unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The international community needs, constructively and without exerting unwarranted pressure, to help the Lebanese people find a comprehensive, effective solution to outstanding problems. But primary responsibility for the fate of Lebanon continues to lie with all Lebanese political forces.

Mrs. Asmady (Indonesia): Let me begin, Sir, by extending my delegation's appreciation to you for presiding over this debate and to Mr. Lynn Pascoe for his briefing.

The conflict in the Middle East remains one of the most pressing issues that the Security Council must resolutely tackle today. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said on various occasions, the Middle East region is more complex, more fragile and more dangerous than it has been for a very long time. Such complexity warrants a decisive and unflagging response from the United Nations, particularly from the Security Council and other bodies of the Organization, and from its leadership. Indonesia has always been of the view that the United Nations must remain constantly engaged in the Middle East if peace is to be won in the region.

In that regard, my delegation appreciates the commitment of the Secretary-General and his recent visit to the Middle East, including Syria. We concur with his observation that solving the Middle East conflict is both a moral and a strategic necessity. We — the United Nations, and not just the Council — bear a moral obligation to bring peace to the region.

Again, because of the magnitude of the challenge, the United Nations cannot meet it alone. Thus, the partnership between the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia within the Quartet forum remains crucial.

We have high hopes in the Quartet, believing that the Quartet should continue its efforts, meet regularly and monitor, through its envoys, developments and actions taken by the parties concerned. We look forward to its forthcoming meetings in the region and encourage the forum to achieve a new, higher level of commitment towards the realization of sustainable peace in the region.

My delegation is also hopeful that, with firsthand information obtained from meetings with various leaders in the region, the Secretary-General will be able to inject new vigour into the work of the Quartet. The Quartet is instrumental in maintaining the momentum at the international level, but, at the regional level, efforts towards peace will also require

actors in the region that have an affinity to the issue. Thus, we commend Saudi Arabia for its important initiatives, including the Mecca meeting, as well as other countries in the region for their contribution.

We also have high regard for the role of the Arab League and commend the Riyadh declaration adopted at its recent Summit. We believe that the international community should support the reaffirmation by League member States, as stipulated in the Declaration, of their commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative.

The Initiative, endorsed in the Road Map, is an important element that forms the bedrock of the peace process. It is a home-grown formula aimed at achieving a genuine and abiding peace in the region — an initiative which affirms that the countries in the region take care of the matters affecting them.

With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, my delegation reiterates its call for restraint and for avoidance of any action that could jeopardize opportunities for peace. We deplore the continued incursions of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Palestinian cities, including Nablus and Jenin, and in refugee camps. We also deplore the IDF's use of Palestinian civilians as human shields in door-to-door searches during those raids. My delegation demands that Israel cease such actions and respect the human rights of the Palestinian people and international law.

The continuing practice of the unlawful construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, in defiance of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, is also deplorable. The harmful consequences of that measure on the Palestinians are obvious. When it reaches its full length of 703 kilometres, the barrier will have fully encircled more than 31,000 people. With 80 per cent of the barrier winding through Palestinian land, Palestinian communities are increasingly cantonized and isolated from each other.

On the bright side of current Israeli-Palestinian relations, we welcome the development of a biweekly mechanism by which President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert consult with one another and discuss political issues on a regular basis. Their commitment to doing their utmost to promote peace is commendable.

The agreement reached between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh on 14 March 2007 on the composition of the unity Government, and its inauguration on 17 March 2007, is a welcome development. We recognize the subtleties that both sides had to deal with in achieving that agreement.

The international community should give the National Unity Government of Palestine a chance to work. International assistance provided by donor States for capacity-building and to promote the efficacy and effectiveness of the unity Government will be essential.

A comprehensive solution to the Middle East conflict should also include the achievement of a permanent solution to those issues that emerged from conflicts between Israel and Lebanon as well as between Israel and Syria.

With reference to Lebanon, my delegation strongly deplores the continuing violations by Israel of Lebanese airspace, which are contrary to the letter and spirit of resolution 1701 (2006). We cannot stress enough the point that if Israel is really committed to the cause of peace, it must abide by its obligations under the rule of law. We remain concerned at the ongoing political turmoil in Lebanon. In our view, while the international community is working hard to ensure peace in the region, the Lebanese people and their leaders should work diligently towards national unity and reconciliation. That is a necessary input that international efforts in the country and in the region cannot do without. We underline the importance of the genuine observance of the Taif Accords by all parties in the region.

On matters related to Syria, it is heartwarming that Syria's role in peace calculations in the Middle East is being widely appreciated.

My delegation welcomes President Assad's willingness to restart negotiations with Israel. We believe that a solution to the Golan Heights issue on the basis of resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 497 (1981) will contribute to the comprehensive settlement of the Middle East conflict. We also welcome President Assad's assurances of Syria's cooperation with the United Nations in all matters relating to peace and security in the Middle East.

In conclusion, my delegation wishes to reaffirm our commitment to making a constructive contribution to efforts aimed at promoting peace in the Middle East. We wish also to reiterate our conviction that the

termination of the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian State, alongside a secure and fully recognized State of Israel, will be fundamental to the attainment of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the United Kingdom.

I wish to begin by thanking Mr. Lynn Pascoe for his report. It is a timely and impressive piece of work. As he made clear, this is a time of opportunity in the Middle East. There are some positive developments that give reason for hope, and it is for the international community to encourage the parties to take advantage of this and to support the peace process.

This is all the more important following the recent escalation in violence, which has led to a number of casualties on both sides. The relative stability over recent months has enabled progress on the political front. A return to violence would be an unacceptable step backwards. In that context, I condemn the violation of the ceasefire in Gaza by Hamas's military wing, and I look to the National Unity Government to take the necessary measures to prevent such attacks. All sides should put an immediate end to violence so that we can continue to concentrate on the political process. It should be apparent to all that meaningful progress can be made only through dialogue.

The creation of the National Unity Government in March was a significant step. The United Kingdom will judge the Government by its platform and actions, and respond accordingly. As we have made clear, we have always been willing to work with a Government based on the Quartet principles. I call on colleagues to be consistent in their message to the National Unity Government on the importance of adhering to those principles.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the formation of the Arab Ministerial Committee for the Arab Peace Initiative, following the reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative at the Arab League Summit in Riyadh. I also welcome the role that Secretary Rice has played in bringing Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas together and their recent meeting on 15 April. I sincerely hope that that dialogue will continue.

We should focus now on what is already available to us. We need to re-energize existing mechanisms and frameworks such as the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative. We must ensure that we maintain momentum, regardless of efforts to detract from the process. Of course, there will be events which could knock us off course. But we cannot allow this process to fall victim to these events or, indeed, to unduly high expectations. Instead, we must find a way to offer hope to both the Israeli and Palestinian people and help them to develop confidence in each other. That is why we need to work together and offer a political horizon.

The international community needs to demonstrate its commitment to a future Palestinian State and to Israel's security. We can send a strong message of support for a viable Palestinian State by improving the capacity of Palestinian institutions. Facilitating the coordination of assistance to the Palestinians will also help in the short term to improve the daily lives of Palestinians. The temporary international mechanism continues to channel humanitarian assistance, but I also call on Israel to release the Palestinian tax revenues.

I welcome Prime Minister Olmert's intention to normalize the opening of the Karni and Rafah border crossings and to ease other restrictions on movement. That would all help to improve the lives of Palestinians and increase the confidence between the parties. But both parties can do more to build confidence. I call for the immediate release of Corporal Shalit and for a halt to the firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel. I understand that President Abbas presented Prime Minister Olmert with a security plan, and I very much hope that, through continuing dialogue, the parties can put it into effect and improve security. I also join in the calls on Israel to abide by the Road Map and freeze all settlement construction, including the growth of existing settlements, and to remove all outposts.

The Quartet has an important leadership role on the peace process, and I am pleased that it has met frequently this year. We would welcome an expanded Quartet meeting, including countries from the region. It goes without saying that there is a role for the region in offering prospects for peace and improved relations for the parties within the region. The United Nations has an important role to play. It is essential that the involvement of all United Nations agencies and bodies be constructive and that the Organization's response to the situation be carefully coordinated. I was pleased to

hear about the Secretary-General's successful visit to the region last month.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have supported our calls for the release of the British journalist Alan Johnston. We continue to appeal for his immediate and unconditional release. His continued detention is completely unacceptable. Alan Johnston has been a great friend of the Palestinian people, and he chose to live in Gaza to report the news, and the truth as he saw it, from Gaza. This is a reprehensible crime, and he must be released immediately, because the existence of a free and vigorous press is the cornerstone of all of our democratic societies.

I would like to reiterate the United Kingdom's commitment to finding a solution in the Middle East that will result in a comprehensive and lasting peace, with two States, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security.

I now turn briefly to Lebanon. We support the continued efforts of Prime Minister Siniora to find a solution to the current political situation. At the heart of those discussions is the issue of a tribunal to try those eventually indicted for the murder of Rafik Hariri. We strongly believe that early establishment of the tribunal is in the interests of all Lebanese, not least to bring to an end, once and for all, the cycle of politically motivated assassinations. We will continue to support efforts to achieve that.

The United Kingdom also remains fully committed to the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), which, like the tribunal, is central to Lebanon's future stability. The Council has just authorized the first significant operational follow-up to that resolution: the dispatch of a United Nations mission to assess the security of the border with Syria. That is an important step that, we hope, will both enhance Lebanese sovereignty and improve compliance with the arms embargo established by resolution 1701 (2006). We look forward also to progress on the Sheba'a farms issue and underline once again the need for the release of the Israeli soldiers abducted last summer.

We have been at moments of opportunity too often before to be, if I may say so, naively optimistic. Great challenges remain on all sides. But the prize of peace and security for the region is there to be grasped if those in the region have the courage and if we in the international community have the commitment. Britain will spare no effort in playing our part.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I call on the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): I congratulate you, Sir, and your country, the United Kingdom, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of April. Palestine is pleased to see you, Minister Howell, presiding over our debate today. I want to assure you that the Palestinian leadership — especially President Abbas — is doing everything it can to secure the release of the BBC journalist Alan Johnston. I express our appreciation to South Africa as well for its skilful leadership of the Council last month. I also thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing to the Council today on the current situation. I should also like to place on record our thanks and appreciation to Mr. Alvaro de Soto for his service and the role he has played. Our leadership will express Palestine's gratitude to him in due course.

This is also an opportune moment to express our appreciation to His Excellency Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his recent visit to the occupied Palestinian territory, where he witnessed first-hand the difficulties on the ground, including, inter alia, the encroachment of the settlements and the wall on all aspects of life and the humanitarian crisis being faced by the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation.

As highlighted during today's briefing, multiple efforts are being made by several parties — particularly the Arab countries, the new Palestinian National Unity Government and the members of the Quartet — to revive the peace process with a view to a resumption of direct negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides and, ultimately, a just and peaceful resolution of this tragic conflict. Those efforts have rekindled the hopes of the Palestinian people and all concerned parties for a breakthrough that will stem the deterioration of the situation and create an environment more conducive to dialogue and substantive peace negotiations.

Regrettably, however, while these efforts are taking place, Israel, the occupying Power, continues to actively carry out illegal policies and practices aimed at sustaining its nearly 40-year-old occupation of the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. While

everyone else talks of peace, Israel's colonization campaign continues, its military aggression on the Palestinian civilian population continues and its collective punishment of the Palestinian people as a whole continues. Such actions are in stark contradiction to the peace efforts and exacerbate the dire situation on the ground, inflaming tensions and cynicism and undermining the resumption of dialogue and negotiation.

Indeed, the backdrop for the current peace efforts remains that of a crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in which the Palestinian people continue to suffer from the serious violations and grave breaches of international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, that continue to be committed by the occupying Power on a daily basis. Thus, while hopes are rising among the Palestinian people, and while their leadership makes efforts to improve living conditions and revive the peace negotiations, the critical situation that they face daily as a result of the occupying Power's actions, along with the unjust international sanctions imposed on them, tempers and threatens to extinguish those hopes.

The reality in the occupied Palestinian territory is a depressing one, but it is one that must be discussed. While we believe that it is necessary for all of us to focus efforts on reviving the peace process and promoting a positive climate, we also believe that it is necessary to draw attention to that reality in order to provide a complete picture of the situation the Palestinian people are actually facing, for no peace effort can succeed under such conditions.

In recent days, Israel, the occupying Power, has continued carrying out destructive and deadly military attacks throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, further terrorizing and traumatizing the besieged civilian population and inflicting more human and material loss on the Palestinian people. More Palestinian civilians, including children, were killed and injured by the Israeli occupying forces during this period as a result of the continued use of excessive, indiscriminate and lethal force. Glaring proof of Israel's continuing disregard for Palestinian life are the acts of aggression committed by it within a 24-hour period this past weekend, which resulted in the killing of nine Palestinians, including two children. In addition, the threat of a massive Israeli invasion of Gaza continues to loom, as indicated by the declarations of several Israeli officials.

The Israeli occupying forces have also continued to carry out arrest campaigns and raids throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, disrupting the daily cycle of life and recklessly endangering the lives of civilians. In that regard, the occupying forces have continued the deplorable practice of using Palestinian civilians, including children, as human shields during door-to-door searches in some of those raids.

The result of such roundups and arrests has been a rapid increase in the number of Palestinian civilians imprisoned or detained by Israel, the occupying Power. At present, there are more than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners, including more than 100 women and at least 300 children, being held in Israeli jails and detention centres, most in inhumane conditions and many subject to torture. This month, the Palestinian people solemnly marked the passage of yet another Prisoner's Day, calling for the release of all those being arbitrarily and illegally imprisoned by Israel and for their humane treatment until the achievement of their freedom. Regrettably, the occupying Power has rejected one initiative after another aimed at releasing Palestinian prisoners, including efforts that would facilitate the release of the captive Israeli soldier and surely reduce tensions between the two sides.

As stated earlier, Israel, the occupying Power, is also intensifying its colonial settlement campaign and its construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and other provisions of applicable international law, in flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions, and in total disrespect for the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. The land grab continues, expansionism continues, and attempts to de facto annex large areas of Palestinian land, particularly in and around occupied East Jerusalem, continue. The occupying Power continues to illegally expand and construct settlements, to build Jewish-only bypass roads to serve those settlements, and to allow the illegal Israeli settlers to act with impunity towards the Palestinian civilian population. Palestinian civilians, including children, continue to be subjected to violence, harassment, intimidation and vandalism perpetrated by armed, fanatical Israeli settlers, particularly in the area of Al-Khalil. None have been held accountable for their

criminal acts, further emboldening them to continue terrorizing the Palestinian people.

The occupying Power is also still confiscating Palestinian land and destroying Palestinian property for its unlawful construction of the wall — an apartheid wall that has completely walled in several Palestinian cities and towns into isolated Bantustans, destroyed thousands upon thousands of livelihoods, and devastated entire communities. It is obvious that the occupying Power continues to pursue such practices with the direct intent of entrenching and fortifying its illegal settlements and its illegal measures of de facto annexation in the Palestinian territory. It is also obvious that the continued colonization of Palestinian land via the settlements and the wall is shredding the territorial integrity of the Palestinian territory and gravely threatens the prospects for physically achieving the two-State solution in accordance with United Nations resolutions and the Quartet road map.

In that regard, the more than 500 checkpoints and roadblocks erected by the occupying Power in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, have totally bisected the territory and continue to severely restrict freedom of movement throughout the territory, as well as into and out of it. Even humanitarian and medical personnel, including those of the United Nations, continue to be subject to such restrictions on movement and harassment. The security pretext cannot justify those checkpoints, which are intended to completely control the movement of persons and goods and clearly function as part of the occupying Power's attempts to constantly dehumanize, humiliate, harass and subjugate the Palestinian people under its occupation. Moreover, it is undeniable that the checkpoints have devastated the Palestinian economy and deepened the humanitarian crisis.

In addition, the occupying Power has continued to impose frequent closures on the occupied Palestinian territory as a whole, subjecting in particular the Rafah crossing in the Gaza Strip — the only point of entry and exit for Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip — to repeated and arbitrary closures. Such actions have worsened the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza — with the poverty rate now over 70 per cent and dependency on food aid widespread — and serve only to further fuel frustrations and tensions among the imprisoned civilian population in Gaza.

Overall, such illegal and unjust Israeli practices constitute collective punishment of the Palestinian people and have had a devastating impact on the socio-economic situation and far-reaching humanitarian consequences. Those policies have prevented any normalcy of life for the Palestinian people and have only brought more misery and hardship for Palestinian families to bear. Additionally, the Palestinian people continue to suffer from the international sanctions imposed on them and Israel's unlawful withholding of millions of dollars of Palestinian tax revenues following the democratic election of their representatives last year.

The Palestinian reality is harsh and depressing. Yet, despite all the foregoing and despite the internal difficulties we have had to face in terms of law and order on the ground, the Palestinian leadership, widely supported by the Palestinian people, continues to earnestly pursue peace. A National Unity Government has been formed, representing the Palestinian political spectrum, and has given President Mahmoud Abbas the mandate to pursue a final peace settlement. Moreover, the agreement among Palestinian factions on a ceasefire and calm remains in force, but Israel, the occupying Power, has yet to reciprocate in any meaningful way, instead continuing to pursue its violent, illegal policies and continuing to promote its distortions of the reality on the ground.

In that regard, we must ask: Why has Israel not accepted the Palestinian offer to extend the ceasefire to the West Bank? Why has Israel not accepted the hand of peace extended to it? Clearly, there is an ongoing phenomenon in Israel wherein the victimizer — the occupier — promotes a culture for its people to live in fear of their victims. The occupying Power violates the human rights of the Palestinian people on a daily basis, including violating their right to life, and then somehow perpetuates the perception that the Israeli people must be afraid and live in fear of those whom they are occupying and subjugating. That distortion is promoted in Israel by those pursuing a narrow extremist agenda, who believe that a ceasefire in the West Bank will undermine support for that agenda. If there is calm, how can they continue to shore up support for such unjustifiable and criminal actions in the occupied Palestinian territory? How can they continue to muster support for the wall, the settlements, the checkpoints, the siege of Jerusalem and the collective punishment of the Palestinian people

from the majority of the Israeli populace, which seeks peace?

Those promoting this culture of fear continue to oppose any ceasefire and any steps that may revive the peace process. They are the same ones who support the policies intended to make Gaza a massive prison, for it is clear that those seeking peace would not lock in the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza, further impoverishing them, compounding their suffering and pushing them to the brink, fuelling violence and extremism. Doing this is not in the interest of peace, but will certainly feed the culture of fear necessary for promoting their twisted and illogical agenda.

This unlawful situation must be brought to an end. It is unjustifiable, unethical, illogical and dangerous and will sabotage any progress made, whether by the Palestinian Authority itself on the ground or by any of the parties concerned, vis-à-vis the peace process.

There is a window of opportunity before us. On the Palestinian side as well as on the Arab side, efforts are being made to seize this opportunity and to move forward. A key component on our part has been the formation of the Palestinian National Unity Government, the political platform of which affirms, among other things, respect for all previous agreements. President Abbas has been mandated by that Government, and thus by all political groups — including Hamas, which is significant and unprecedented — to negotiate with Israel, the occupying Power, a just and final peace settlement.

A second component constitutes the efforts being exerted by the Arab countries. The Arab Peace Initiative, first adopted by the Arab Summit in Beirut in 2002, was reaffirmed by the recent Arab Summit held in Riyadh under the leadership and encouragement of the Saudi Government. Full peace and normalization of relations are being offered to Israel in exchange for full withdrawal from the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 and the establishment of an independent Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, along with a just and agreed upon solution for Palestine refugees on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948.

A follow-up Arab Ministerial Committee meeting took place last week and decided on some practical steps to invigorate the Arab Peace Initiative, including plans to meet with the members of the Security Council, the Secretary-General and the members of the Quartet. The Ministerial Committee also decided to call for an international conference, under the auspices of the United Nations and the other members of the Quartet, for all parties to the conflict to attend.

Those two components provide us — Palestine, Israel, the international community, the members of the Quartet and, of course, the Security Council — with a historic opportunity. This opportunity should not be lost like so many before it. We must build upon the momentum generated and proceed with peace efforts in a serious manner, with the fortitude to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably arise to the achievement of a final peace settlement.

On the Palestinian side, we are willing and ready. President Abbas, with support and a mandate from all Palestinian political groups, is prepared to negotiate final status issues unconditionally. If there is a partner for peace on the Israeli side to negotiate with us without conditions, we are ready. It is at the negotiating table where both sides can bring their concerns and it is there that real dialogue can take place, understandings be reached and solutions found. Those who continue to impose conditions before negotiations do not want peace, for such conditions are just empty excuses to delay and avoid peacemaking.

Because we want negotiations to be fair and to be successful, we believe in the benefit of conducting negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides in the framework of an international conference. Negotiations in the presence of common and supportive friends would best promote the peace process, by, inter alia, encouraging dialogue, holding both parties to their obligations and compelling them not to leave the negotiations until an agreement is signed. All successful negotiations between the Arab and Israeli sides, and other negotiations in contemporary history, have been conducted with the help of a third party who encouraged the parties through the stages and assisted them to reach agreement. That option, as recently proposed by the Arab Ministerial Committee, should be seriously considered and widely supported.

The Security Council, as the United Nations organ responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security, and the Quartet members as a whole, should not allow this historic opportunity to escape us. The opportunities provided by the

relaunching of the Arab Peace Initiative and the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government should be seized upon. The Road Map should be revived. International law and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, which remain the foundation of any peace process, should be respected and not pushed aside. Such efforts will ensure the establishment of a positive environment for dialogue and fair negotiations between the two sides towards the realization of the two-State solution of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security on the basis of the pre-1967 borders.

Of course, such efforts must also include urgent measures to address the situation on the ground in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. We reiterate that no peace effort can succeed if that crisis situation is allowed to continue. The international community, including the Security Council, must take steps to compel Israel, the occupying Power, to cease its human rights violations and grave breaches against the Palestinian people. Furthermore, the Palestinian people should not continue to be punished and burdened with endless conditions and unjust sanctions. How can that be tolerated while the occupying Power continues to act with impunity and without accountability on all fronts? The sanctions should be lifted immediately, allowing for the resumption of needed assistance to the Palestinian people to alleviate the humanitarian crisis, to assist in the rebuilding of institutions and to support the Palestinian Authority's serious efforts to promote stability on the ground and progress towards a negotiated peace.

All of that is necessary to keep hope alive and to support the momentum recently generated for the promotion of efforts aimed at achieving the just, lasting and final peace settlement we all so desperately seek. We should all uphold our responsibilities in this regard. The Palestinian side reaffirms today its commitment to do so and appeals once again for the support of all concerned parties in this urgent endeavour.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Gillerman (Israel): At the outset, Mr. President, allow me to congratulate your Permanent Representative and the entire delegation of the United Kingdom on their able stewardship of the Council and their impressive leadership during the month of April. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his informative briefing.

I must admit that, while heartened and encouraged by the statements made by members of the Council who recognized the impressive and positive changes on the ground and highlighted the opportunities, I was very saddened by the sense of "déja vu all over again" demonstrated by the Palestinian observer. It is eerie, and very distressing and boring, if that statement indeed speaks for the Palestinian people. Speaking of Gaza as a "massive prison" blatantly ignores the fact that Israel left every single inch of Gaza nearly two years ago and that it is the Palestinians themselves who turned it into a prison for their own people by making it a terror base and a launching pad for missiles into Israel from day one. Speaking of the "poor Palestinian prisoners" as "victims" is a blatant attempt to portray them as poor victims who were imprisoned for parking violations rather than bloody murderers who committed horrendous acts of murder and who are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians, including women, children and babies.

Yesterday, we in Israel celebrated our Independence Day, marking Israel's fifty-ninth year of statehood. It is, of course, a time of great joy and festivity. We celebrate the greatest miracle to happen to our people in contemporary history: the gift of our own country, to be a free people in our homeland. We celebrate the vibrancy and vigour of the State of Israel. We celebrate its remarkable renaissance and growth, especially for such a small country and after only 59 years of existence. And we celebrate the beauty and openness of Israeli democracy, the bountiful and rich contributions of Israelis to international arts and culture, science and medicine, and the resilience of a people who fervently dream of peace each and every day.

And yet the reality of Israeli history means that Independence Day is also a solemn time, when we remember the difficulties of the past. We honour the valiant courage of our soldiers who were killed while defending the people of Israel and the great tragedy that befell the victims of terror. We mourn them, and we miss them. They would have contributed so greatly to life in Israel and to the betterment of the entire world.

But it is not only the reality of history that lingers in our minds. It is also the reality of the present day and the challenges ahead.

I would like at this point also to commend the Secretary-General for his timely and intensive visit to the region last month. Having accompanied him during his visit to Israel, I was privileged to witness first-hand his commitment, dedication and integrity.

Coming back to the reality on the ground, that harrowing reality was demonstrated yet again yesterday, when Hamas, by its own account and declaration, launched more than 28 Qassam rockets and 61 mortar shells at Israel, a fact that was clearly blatantly ignored in the statement we just heard from the representative of Palestine. The rockets detonated across a large area of land, and as far north as the city of Ashkelon. These attacks, which came as Israelis woke up to celebrate Independence Day, were nothing short of an act of extreme provocation. Later in the day, we learned that Hamas's fierce rocket fire was just a front to divert attention away from its truly evil plans to kidnap an Israeli soldier. Thankfully, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) thwarted the kidnapping.

Yesterday Hamas declared the ceasefire that had been in place in the Gala Strip null and void. Since the ceasefire began at the end of November 2006, Israel has continually exhibited restraint with respect to the more than 200 rockets fired at it by Palestinian terrorists. Israel always reserves the right to defend itself and its people, as set out in article 51 of the United Nations Charter, and will do so if the attacks do not stop. I strongly advise the Palestinians and the world not to mistake this restraint for acquiescence or to take it for granted. We will not just lie back and take it, and we will do all that is necessary to put an end to this violence.

If there are still any sceptics out there, yesterday the Hamas-led Palestinian Government showed its true colours. Israel needs no further evidence to know that Hamas's ways are not the ways of peace. Hamas has shown it will not stop its campaign of terror until its unholy ambitions of destroying Israel are fulfilled.

The international community, represented by the Quartet, has made the obligations of the Palestinian Government very clear: to recognize Israel, renounce violence and terror and abide by previous agreements. Hamas also still holds the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, kidnapped by its terrorists last June. Those basic conditions are principles of peace. As the Palestinian Government flouts those conditions and sees terror as a legitimate goal, the international community should continue its policy towards that Government. Nothing — no initiatives, summits or declarations — can take the place of an end to Palestinian terror. We will continue to engage with President Abbas, as Prime Minister Olmert has been doing in their biweekly meetings, but we will fight Hamas as if there were no Abbas.

Nine months after the adoption of resolution 1701 (2006), the situation along the Blue Line in the north remains a matter of great concern. In particular, Israel has identified three major areas that demand urgent attention: the presence of armed Hizbullah elements south of the Litani river and the transfer of weapons from Syria to Hizbullah in Lebanon in violation of the arms embargo; the concern that some of those weapons are destined for southern Lebanon; and the continued abduction of our soldiers, Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped by Hizbullah terrorists nearly 10 months ago. Their continued detention and the absence of any sign of life pose a grave humanitarian crisis.

I would like to mention at this time that there are five more Israeli soldiers being held captive, without any information given on their safety or whereabouts. They are Ron Arad, Zachary Baumel, Yehuda Katz, Tzvi Feldman and Guy Chever. We pray for their safety and await their return home. We urge the international community and this Council to do their utmost to make this happen. We also pray for the safe return of the British journalist, Alan Johnston.

Resolution 1701 (2006) is unequivocal in its demands for the disarming of Hizbullah south of the Litani River, for an end to the transfer of arms to Hizbullah terrorists and for the immediate and unconditional release of our soldiers. The blatant actions of Iran and Syria — the sponsors of terror in Lebanon, who are rearming Hizbullah and sending weapons in defiance of resolution 1701 (2006) — must end now.

Lastly, I wish to note that Israel welcomes the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2007/147) on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and is encouraged by the presidential statement adopted by the Council during its 5564th meeting, on 17 April 2007 (S/PRST/2007/12). In particular, Israel is pleased with the attention given to the illegal movement of arms across the Lebanese-Syrian border and with the

call to enforce the arms embargo. Israel is hopeful that a concerted effort in both areas will lead to greater stability and security.

As Israel looks forward to a prosperous and peaceful coming year — our sixtieth year of independence — we know there is no shortage of challenges ahead of us. But we are prepared to meet each and every one of them, no matter what it takes. Israel yearns to live in peace with all her neighbours. Though we know that these efforts can be strengthened by moderates in our region, we also know that no one can make peace for our neighbours. It is up to the parties themselves to show the courage to face down the extremists and embrace their responsibilities.

In the meanwhile, Israel will continue to defend itself, while praying for peace, taking strength in one another and putting trust in our faith and traditions, in our social progress and human values and in our people, wherever they may be.

The President: I next give the floor to the representative of Lebanon.

Ms. Ziade (Lebanon): At the outset, I wish to congratulate you, Sir, on your presidency of the Security Council for the month of April and to express my appreciation to your Government and to the Security Council for their unremitting support and close review of events in Lebanon. I would like to express our deep gratitude to the South African delegation for their leadership last month. Lebanon greatly values the efforts of this distinguished body and appreciates its significant accomplishments. I also wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

What can we say about the situation in the Middle East? It is a conflict almost 60 years old, one which resulted in an uprooted nation, with a majority of its population transformed into refugees. It is a history of a blocked peace, an obstructed horizon, repetitive wars, immense pain and suffering and an emerging radicalism. We all need to draw lessons from these injustices in order to save the world from future violence and extremism.

Five years ago, Arab leaders held a summit in Beirut and adopted the principles of an Arab peace initiative, whereby two States would be established, lands would be restored, the refugee problem would be addressed on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and normal relations with Israel would be established with a full peace. Five years ago, Israel rejected that initiative.

Because of that, today the Middle East is sadly not so different than before. Israel's colonialist policies are pursued with the same level of determination and short-sightedness, to the detriment of all — the construction of the imprisonment wall, the continued growth of settlements and the collective punishment of an entire population.

On 28 and 29 March of this year, Arab leaders held another summit in Riyadh and reactivated their Peace Initiative of 2002 with a follow-up mechanism. On 18 April, the Arab ministerial committee in charge of the Peace Initiative held a meeting and decided to establish a ministerial delegation to promote their principles of peace. This delegation is to hold meetings with the United Nations Secretary-General, the members of the Security Council, the European Union and the Middle East Quartet.

That meeting reaffirmed the Arab commitment for a comprehensive, just and peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, the same level of commitment is required from Israel in order to achieve this peace and to create confidence-building measures. The Arab summit also called for an international conference — with the participation of all regional and international parties, including Israel, under the auspices of the United Nations and of the Quartet — in order to relaunch direct negotiations on all tracks. This initiative is an historic opportunity that must be seized to ensure peace, security and stability in the region.

Turning to Lebanon, I wish to emphasize that Lebanon is committed to the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), abides by its obligations under that resolution and looks forward to a permanent ceasefire that will guarantee Lebanon's stability and security. However, Israel's repeated overflights into Lebanese airspace, its continued occupation of the northern part of the Lebanese town of Ghajar in breach of the Blue Line and its continued detention of Lebanese civilians in Israeli prisons are all violations of international law and exacerbate an already tense situation.

While those violations should not be linked to the enforcement of the embargo on illegal arms, Lebanon has taken a series of necessary measures to curb illegal arms activities. To that end, it has deployed over 8,000 troops on its eastern and northern frontiers with Syria,

and it is cooperating with the German Government in a pilot project to improve its border security.

The situation south of the Litani River remains generally calm, where cooperation and coordination between the Lebanese army and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have been especially good. Any other and different allegations would not be accepted. In addition, UNIFIL's maritime force has been successful in securing our coastal waters. Furthermore, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has offered to send an evaluation mission to assess the security situation along our eastern and northern borders, with which we will cooperate fully. We consider border control and the prevention of the illegal entry of arms to be vital issues of national security.

Cluster bombs remain a continuing threat to the civilian population in south Lebanon. We urge the international community to press Israel to submit all relevant information as to where these bombs were dropped and to submit maps for the landmines they planted during their aggression. Any other allegation by Israel aimed at diverting attention away from this humanitarian crime is a subterfuge that must be rejected.

In the meantime, the Lebanese Government welcomes the progress made by United Nations cartographers on the Sheba'a Farms region and looks forward to United Nations recommendations in this regard that would echo the proposal contained in Lebanon's seven-point plan calling for the withdrawal of Israel from the Lebanese Sheba'a Farms and placing the latter under United Nations jurisdiction.

Lebanon is also pursuing the vital matter of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon to safeguard liberties and to put an end to impunity in our country. The Tribunal is crucial for peace and stability in Lebanon, which has had a long and tragic history of political assassinations with impunity.

The world cannot afford another five years of rejection and unilateral initiatives. The world cannot afford another five years of conditionality and mistrust. The world cannot afford another five years of destruction and death.

Peace is not a luxury; it is a necessity for a better future and the prevalence of moderation. Peace will ensure life, liberty, dignity, prosperity and justice for all citizens of the area.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Darwish (Syrian Arab Republic) *(spoke in Arabic)*: At the outset, we would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your country's assumption of the presidency of the Council for this month. We would like to express our appreciation for the great efforts made by the Permanent Representative of South Africa and his delegation during his friendly country's presidency of the Council during the previous month. That presidency was characterized by South Africa's firm commitment to noble principles and values and its great legacy of struggle against racism and racial discrimination and the affirmation of the rights of peoples in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations and the bases of international law. I should like also to express our thanks to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his briefing to us this morning.

This meeting of the Security Council to review the situation in the Middle East this month coincides with the sixty-first commemoration by my country of the end of French colonialism on its soil — colonialism from which we suffered immensely.

It is well known to Council members that the Middle East, for many decades, has suffered from colonialism, division, occupation, invasion, injustice, repression, suppression, the falsification of facts, instability and the use of force against its peoples.

The continued Israeli occupation of the Arab territories in Palestine, the Golan and southern Lebanon; its refusal to respond seriously to the Arab Peace Initiative; and the fact that it continues to beat the drums of war is clear evidence once again of its continued aggression against the rights of our peoples and underscores the fact that Israel does not believe in peace.

In response to the fact that successive Israeli Governments have shirked the requirements of a just and comprehensive peace through the use of flimsy pretexts and excuses that do not hold up in the face of facts, the Arab leaders, at their summit meeting last month, relaunched the Arab Peace Initiative. Israel responded to the Arab Peace Initiative with trickery

and prevarication and set out conditions that practically amount to a complete rejection of that initiative.

Allow me on this occasion to inform the Council of some of the most important elements contained in the Arab Peace Initiative which has been rejected by Israel since its adoption in 2002. Israel continues to prevaricate in order to render it null and void. The Arab Peace Initiative underscores the Arab commitment to a just and comprehensive peace as a strategic option and the fact that a comprehensive peace process cannot be partitioned. In accordance with the principles of international legitimacy, the Arab Peace Initiative emphasizes that a just and comprehensive peace in the region can be achieved only through a complete Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian and Arab lands, including the occupied Syrian Golan, to the 4 June 1967 border, and on the basis of a just and agreed upon solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948.

The Arab Peace Initiative rejects all forms of forced settlement of Palestinian refugees and emphasizes the establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestinian State, with Jerusalem as its capital. In implementation of the decisions of the Riyadh summit, the Ministerial Committee for the Arab Peace Initiative met in Cairo on 18 April, where the ministers adopted a plan to present the Arab point of view on ways to implement the initiative. They emphasized that the Arab commitment to a just and comprehensive peace and to the settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict also requires a commitment by the Israeli Government in order to bring about such a peace.

In that connection, it is imperative for Israel to take the necessary confidence-building measures and to begin a serious negotiation process on all tracks within a specific timeframe, on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative and the decisions of relevant international authorities and building on what has been achieved previously in the peace process.

The Arab ministers called for the convening of an international meeting, held under the auspices of the United Nations and with the participation of the relevant regional and international parties, to launch a direct negotiation process on all tracks, in accordance with the agreed terms of reference and with a specific timetable.

Successive Israeli Governments have been afflicted with the illness of aggression and have rejected the hand of peace when it was extended to them. Israel has continued to carry out a policy of aggression, assassination, continuous escalation and provocation. The aggression against Lebanon last July and the assassination by Israeli death squads of Palestinian leaders and citizens, in addition to the continued detention of a large number of members of the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority, including the Speaker of the Council and a large number of Palestinian ministers, shows clearly the Israeli Government's contempt for international law, internationally binding resolutions and the principle of respect for the democratic will of peoples.

Israel continues to violate the truce agreement reached five months ago between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, committing daily killings and destroying Palestinian property and infrastructure. Israel continues to use Palestinian citizens as human shields, in addition to continuing the inhumane siege that it has imposed on the Palestinian people and continuing to build the separation wall, in flagrant violation of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, United Nations resolutions and international law.

Since it occupied the Arab Syrian Golan, Israel has continued to use various means to confiscate land, Judaize the population, destroy the people's sense of national identity and expel them from their land, cities, villages and farms. Those villages and towns numbered 244 in 1967. Israel has dedicated resources and capacity to establish settlements and attract settlers from all over the world — people who have no relationship whatsoever to the occupied territory — all to deprive the people of the occupied Syrian Golan of their lands, their livelihoods, their fundamental freedoms and their human rights. Israel has attempted to annex the Syrian Golan and impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration upon it. But international legitimacy, as represented in the relevant United Nations resolutions, has declared its rejection of that decision. The Security Council, in its resolution 497 (1981), decided that the Israeli decision to annex the Syrian Golan was null and void and without international legal effect.

Israel continues to bury its nuclear waste and plant mines in the occupied Syrian Golan, despite the fact that they pose a serious threat to the lives of Syrian citizens and to their environment. Israel also continues

to imprison many Syrian citizens in the occupied Syrian Golan under inhumane conditions, treating them in a manner that contradicts all international laws and conventions. My country calls on the Security Council to take serious measures against Israel to force it to release the Syrian prisoners it holds, some of whom have been detained in Israel's prisons for more than 25 years.

I would also like to point out that, on the morning of 18 April 2007, a 15-member Israeli motorized force raided the house of the Syrian citizen Ghassan Rabah in the occupied town of Majdal Shams. As a result of the brutal treatment that he received, he was subsequently transported to the hospital, along with his wife. On the same morning, Israeli occupation forces arrested the engineer Faris Majid, also of Majdal Shams, after raiding and searching his house. He was subjected to the same brutal treatment at the hands of the Israeli occupying forces.

Syria has chosen a just and comprehensive peace as a strategic option to restore the Golan and the other occupied Arab territories. Israel must understand that such a peace requires that it withdraw from the occupied Golan to the line of 4 June 1967 and from all other occupied territories.

Before I conclude, it is imperative that I respond to comments made by some delegations with regard to certain references made at this meeting to claims — particularly on the part of Israel — concerning transborder weapons movements, because such claims can only elicit scorn and have no connection to reality. Syria has expressed at the highest levels its commitment to implementing resolution 1701 (2006). The Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, referred to this very clearly yesterday at his press conference in Damascus. Syria has taken all the necessary measures on its borders to fulfil its obligations under that resolution. Moreover, in his most recent report, the Secretary-General emphasized that Syria is committed to doing its part to implement the resolution.

Israel continues its violations of resolution 1701 (2006), which have been documented in many reports from the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. But the matter does not stop there; the Lebanese authorities have uncovered Israeli weapons and Israeli spy networks in Lebanon. They have also uncovered agents of the Israeli Mossad who have committed political assassinations in Lebanon. All of this is in flagrant violation of resolution 1701 (2006), aggravates the Lebanese situation and harms the friendly relations between Syria and Lebanon.

This morning, Mr. Pascoe — whom we thank for his briefing — stated that the Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace, carried out under the pretext of responding to another violation, are unjustified. What would members say, if there were no violations to which to respond, as proven by the evidence and facts. In that regard, we would like to note that the Lebanese authorities at the highest levels — including the President, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence and other senior officials — here at the United Nations a few weeks ago and elsewhere, have denied that there have been any instances of weapons smuggling across the Lebanese-Syrian border. That is also emphasized by the Secretary-General in paragraph 29 of his report (S/2007/147). In that connection, we would like to point out that the Lebanese Minister of Defence recently stated that not even a mosquito could get through the Lebanese-Syrian border.

Syria has doubled the number of guards along its border and has been conducting patrols around the clock. In addition, it has strengthened the earthen berms along the border to prevent any kind of smuggling. We recall that Syrian security officials, following up on their efforts to prevent weapons smuggling to Lebanon, found a truck, bearing Iraqi license plates, containing smuggled weapons bound for Lebanon. We have provided the Secretary-General with evidence and other information concerning that incident, and we provided the Security Council with detailed information about it in a letter dated 26 March 2007. In that connection, we would like to inform Council members that the meetings of the joint Lebanese-Syrian committee are continuing. The committee has held two meetings, and a third will be held at the end of this month to discuss controlling the border between the two countries and preventing any form of smuggling across it.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that Prime Minister Olmert recently stated that the decision to commit aggression against Lebanon had been taken four months before it began in July 2006. Moreover, a former representative of one of the five permanent members of the Security Council has admitted that his country prevented the Council from immediately imposing a ceasefire during that aggression and during

the large-scale military manoeuvres now being conducted by Israel in the occupied Syrian Golan. That serves as clear proof that Israel is pursuing its aggressive policies and will lead the region only into deeper tension, destruction and instability.

Syria calls on the Security Council to assume its responsibilities, as stipulated in the United Nations Charter, to maintain international peace and security in the region and throughout the world and to pressure Israel to implement Council resolutions, particularly resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973); to withdraw from the occupied Arab territories; and to establish a just and comprehensive peace in the region based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the Madrid terms of reference, which guarantee the return of the occupied Arab territories, to the borders of 4 June 1967. Syria does this in the belief that this is the only means of ensuring peace and security for all in the Middle East.

The President: I thank all participants for their contributions today.

I should like also to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

Finally, I want on behalf of the Council to echo Mr. Pascoe's words of gratitude to Alvaro de Soto for a lifetime of service to the United Nations, including to the cause which unites us all here today — the cause of peace in the Middle East.

The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The meeting rose at 1.35 p.m.